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ABSTRACT

This paper surveys forensics research broadly over the last 26 years and argues for research that more comprehensively accounts for forensics in its full range of activity. Forensics research has historically tended to focus on one area of competition. The paper argues for more research that conceptualizes the activity across these practices and for research that may benefit programs that do more than one kind of forensics activity. Research in forensics has also been characterized by some authors as lacking to some degree in quality. These authors note that lack of solid research hurts programs' chances for increased funding and other necessities since administrators have been characterized as an audience most likely to be persuaded by solid quantitative research. The paper argues along with these authors for higher quality in forensics research relative to other kinds of research, contending that this must begin with more complete basic research. Without discounting the work of scholars over the last 26 years, the paper calls for a higher standard of research which more closely follows research norms of the academe at large. Contains 24 references. (Author/NKA)

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Exploring the Forensics Community: The Need for Stronger Basic Research

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Abstract

This paper surveys forensics research over the last 26 years broadly and argues for research that more comprehensively accounts for forensics in its full range of activity. Historically, forensics research has tended to focus on one area of competition (individual events, evidence-based debate, or parliamentary debate, for example). This paper argues for more research that conceptualizes the activity across these practices and for research that may benefit programs that do more than one kind of forensics activity. Such a goal is especially important today, as the increasing popularity of parliamentary debate has led to the addition of debate to many traditionally individual event-only programs. Research in forensics has also been characterized by some authors as lacking to some degree in quality. These authors note that lack of solid research hurts programs' chances for increased funding and other necessities, since administrators, have been characterized as an audience most likely to be persuaded by solid quantitative research. This paper argues along with these authors for higher quality in forensics research relative to other kinds of research. An argument is made that this must begin with more complete basic research. Without discounting the work of scholars over the last 26 years, this paper calls for a higher standard of research, more closely following research norms of the academe at large.

Exploring the Forensics Community: The Need for Stronger Research

Instruction in speech is one of the oldest forms of pedagogy practiced in the West. Scholarship in rhetorical studies places Corax and Tisias as the earliest teachers of rhetoric while more recent scholarship also includes Aspasia, Diotima, and others among the earliest teachers of speech (see for example, Glenn, 1997). The need for study of speech as phenomenon and pedagogy has been the subject of a long tradition starting with Aritstotle's On Rhetoric, as well and including the work of many thinkers over the past twenty five hundred years. That a subject of instruction almost as old as instruction in war should need research should not be surprising; ways of speaking and performing change along with culture and civilization in general. That the subject should need justification should be surprising. Yet, this is one primary reason for research in forensics as pedagogy today.

Competitive forensics has benefited the lives of countless people. Across all levels of our society, one finds people for whom competing in forensics was a pivotal and possibly even defining experience, helping to shape their work habits, thought patterns and worldviews. The ability to motivate students to increase their cognitive abilities is, as Klumpp (1990) writes, its greatest and most unique quality. Forensics training has had a hand in molding many of our notable figures, ranging from policy makers and constitutional scholars, to television and screen actors as well as social/political and educational leaders.

It seems perplexing, given what seem to many to be the obvious benefits of forensics competition, that the activity finds itself in the position of continually fighting for its existence. Institutional support in the form of resource allocation, faculty position configuration that allows coaching and directing of forensics programs to occur, and overall credibility is a luxury that most programs appear not to have. One possible explanation for this lack of support in the face of what seems to be significant evidence that forensics is nothing but beneficial might be that the research by which the forensics community represents itself is lacking on the qualities needed to better secure such support. This paper argues for a first step in the process of making forensics

research more conventional in its approach as a mechanism for improving the research in general as well as making it more useful to forensics programs working to determine their places in the university setting. This paper discusses some problems with forensic research and offers a rationale for more rigorous research in forensics.

Describing Ourselves: Survey Research

In this section, general problems with forensics research are discussed, along with assessment of survey research in forensics in particular. First, a general assessment of forensics research is offered, highlighting general areas of need in the literature. Second, a discussion of survey research in forensics literature is offered. Third, an argument is made for descriptive survey research on the makeup of the forensic community.

Given the dependency upon administrators for funding and support, it is perhaps surprising that forensics research has not made a more concerted effort toward establishing a coherent body of literature defending its educational approach. While several criticisms have been leveled at the forensics literature, Porter (1990) perhaps puts is best when she characterizes the central motivational problem with forensics research as a the lack of recognition of the value research can play in legitimizing forensics:

> . . . the most significant problem facing the forensic community is that we have neither documented nor articulated the importance of our area of expertise to the community at large. We will continue to be overlooked as a viable area of study until we recognize and begin conducting scholarly research in our discipline. (p. 95)

Here Porter argues not so much for a body of research that always finds in favor of forensics, but for a body of research that seeks to explore forensics in a more scientific fashion. It is the method complexity, and amount of research, Porter argues, that will make the difference between being taken seriously and being cast aside.

Porter's argument echoes those of others who call for a more rigorous approach to forensics research, emphasizing more conventional approaches to making evidenced claims about theory and hypotheses in forensic research as well as more conventional reporting styles for those claims. Porter makes suggestions for the direction forensics research ought to take and

argues for four advantages to forensics research to an improved body of forensics research. She argues first that more scholarly research would enhance the probability of forensics coaches securing tenure by better demonstrating to administrators the value of what they do. This is an important area, since directors of forensics often experience difficulty in finding evidence other than anecdotal evidence to support their arguments for tenure and promotion. Consequently, educators who often work incredible workloads do not get credit for that time and effort.

Second, Porter argues that better research would elevate the discipline in the eyes of colleagues by better demonstrating the nature and value of what forensics professionals do. Many of the misperceptions about forensics as an unstructured activity that takes away from research and classroom teaching time could be changed by simple awareness. Improved credibility through better research, Porter argues, is the way to increase this awareness.

Third, Porter argues that better research in forensics would add to the knowledge of the discipline by strengthening the theoretical connections between the communication discipline and forensics. Forensics as an educational exercise and as an application-oriented method for teaching communication principles holds real opportunity for study in many areas, according to Porter. Better scholarship could be the link between the communication filed and forensics. Improved credibility can attract researchers to forensics as a research opportunity.

Finally, Porter argues that improved research would enhance the practical application of forensics by demonstrating to the academic world outside of forensics that the approach is educationally valuable as an application of communication principles. Such a demonstration could do so by helping to generate support, which could contribute to the activity's membership and improved functionality as an outlet for students.

Dean (1990) agrees with Porter along very similar lines. Both articulate the argument that improved research stands to significantly benefit forensics, and by extension many students and forensics professionals. The starting place for an improved body of forensics research will most likely be in beginning with basic goals of overcoming some of the common criticisms of such research.

Despite Porter's claims, forensics does have a diversity of approaches as well as somewhat of a history. Hunt (1996, 1995) provides extensive documentation of the extent of this body of research. Klumpp (1990) divides forensics research into three predominant areas: Descriptive surveys, prescriptive pieces about how to conduct events and other forensic activities, and theory articles, arguing for or against theoretical approaches to forensic activities. Logue and Shea (1990) also note this division of studies, adding that most individual event research has focused on skill building, while debate research has largely fallen into theory discussion and explorations of the laboratory (Aden, 1991), experiential education (Sellnow, 1994), and argumentative (McBath, Bartanen, & Gossett, 1979) perspectives as justification for forensics education. Both areas of research, Logue and Shea note, have been largely unable to generalize to all of forensics or to populations outside of forensics. These studies, they note seem to suffer from conceptual problems that inhibit this generalization, so their utility is limited.

Forensics research has also been characterized as having problems in building arguments within the research. These problems can be seen in preferences for forms of evidence that do not accord with conventional research in fields outside of forensics. Klumpp (1990) identifies two inadequacies relating to the nature of evidence offered in forensics research. First, he writes that forensics professional often transfer the need for authority that makes possible the coaching methods used in forensics to the research piece, tending to pontificate. Thus, such research focuses on argument building through credibility and consistency of argument, with little appeal to objective methods for substantiating claims. Forensics research, in effect, gets turned into extended debate speeches. Klumpp argues for the need for better forms of proof than assertion of existential superiority and authority. This improved standard would give forensics research credibility and provide for more usable research. A second inadequacy identified by Klumpp also deals with the kind of proof often found in forensics. Klumpp notes that much of forensics research relies on anecdotal evidence. This provides more evidence, Klumpp argues, that forensics researchers tend to confuse the argument building necessary to coaching with the argument building necessary to success in peer-reviewed journals.

Problems with survey research and the need for new approaches

Klumpp (1990) identifies several problems with survey research in forensics and makes suggestions for conducting this kind of research. First, he writes that descriptive surveys are too time-bound to be useful for long. Such studies, he claims, are only snapshots of the time in which they were administered. This general argument is disputed by Porter (1990), who writes that the basic structure of forensics is slow to change, and such data is useful for a considerable amount of time. Porter writes that "the tournament events and the schedule by which we operate remain relatively unchanged" (p. 99). Second, Klumpp argues that descriptive surveys are useful only to administrators of forensics programs who can use the studies to more or less place their programs in relation to others. Third, Klumpp argues that such research is characterized by bad research design, samples that are too small or that return rates are too low. In addition, the designs are often based on assumptions that have not been tested and are asserted only in an anecdotal fashion. Porter (1990) echoes this argument, adding that "we put our theories into practice before they have been adequately tested" (p. 100). The solution to these problems, Klumpp writes, is to improve the credibility of the research by adhering more to conventions of non-forensics research in terms of proof and rigor when conducting survey research.

It is important to note that while the preceding criticisms of forensics research point toward some deep problems in the overall approach of forensics research, none of these authors view the research as "bad" in the sense that it does not contribute usefully to pedagogy and the overall health of forensics. In fact, Dean (1990) argues that published pieces on coaching con be of tremendous benefit. The problem, then, is not that all forensics research is bad, it is that it needs additional qualities to be successful in promoting the activity. The primary argument of these authors is that in order to increase the credibility of the research and thereby the credibility of forensics as a whole, more conventional approaches should be pursued. Porter (1990) argues for a move toward experimental research in order to increase credibility. Her argument is that this is the kind of research that appeals most to those whose assignment of credibility would be desirable. In addition, Porter (1990), Pettus and Danielson (1992) as well as Logue and Shea

(1990) call for, as a first step in this process, the establishment of solid basic research that may be used as the foundation for such rigorous experimental research. A study that sought to begin such a research agenda would be beneficial, crucial, in fact, according to Porter. Logically, it would seem that such a study ought to be the establishment of concepts with which the research is concerned.

This paper argues in favor of basic descriptive research in the area of forensics. This paper proposes exploratory research into the characteristics of the forensics community. Since several authors have claimed that forensics research has been plagued by bad design often stemming from untested or anecdotally asserted assumptions, it also is logical to argue that starting at basic description is desirable. This will allow forensics researchers a definite set of descriptive assumptions from which to start.

Several basic studies of forensics with the goal of basic level description have been done in several areas. Klopf and Rives (1965) studied high school and university level directors of forensics. Church (1975) surveyed advisors and law school deans about their attitudes toward forensics. Sayer (1976) studied budgets of programs across the nation. Hassencahl (1979) explored the availability of courses on directing forensics. Murphy (1991) surveyed forensics professionals about their job satisfaction. Finally, Jensen (1993) surveyed programs to describe overall approaches to forensics in terms of emphases of programs as either emphasizing debate or individual events.

None of this research addresses the most basic question of whom current competitors and coaches are in forensics. Additionally, none of this research addresses what kinds of success forensic competitors experience after participation in forensics. It is these two areas that the proposed study seeks to explore. Basic descriptive research in these areas would have several advantages. First, such research would give future research a clear idea of whom they were studying. This would be helpful in defining the population for future experimental and other kinds of research that could be conducted to overcome some of the weaknesses described above. Also, if Porter (1990) is correct, such research would be useful for some time to come. Second,

directors of forensics could use such research and any subsequent studies that build on it, to demonstrate to administrators the kind of students, both graduate and undergraduate, that forensics can attract to universities with strong programs, thus giving them a tool for justification of their programs and evidence to use in appeals for continued and increased support from administrators. This would be helpful in answering the call raised by Porter (1990) for increased demonstration of the value of forensics to the world outside forensics. Third, it may provide researchers with new ideas for research. It may very well be the case that simple lack of knowledge of who is available for study has prevented many researchers from conceptualizing studies based on those people. Simply finding out who is participating may be the basis for new directions for research. Given these possibilities, a primary question guiding research would be simple: Who are the constituents of the forensics community?

Observing Ourselves: Qualitative Research

The amount of time spent doing forensics activity of some kind or another presents opportunities for myriad qualitative studies including interview-oriented studies, thematic studies based on open-ended response questionnaires, and especially descriptive ethnographic observational work. Importantly, the writing of forensics as a cultural activity is undertaken in many instructionally practical articles found in the forensics literature. Attempts to textualize forensics range from prescriptive pieces giving advice on how to coach or compete to quantitative variable analytic work seeking to measure forensics and its effects. These contributions to our research are critical to the exchange of ideas between established coaches and an important source of information for new coaches. Despite this variety, however, no ethnographic research (that is based on established ethnographic norms of observation and writing) on forensics exists. Given the nature of forensics and those who study it, this seems to be a significant oversight. Since those who study it are most often those who also participate as coaches, the opportunity for close observation would appear to be an opportunity more would have taken. In addition, studies utilizing rigorous research techniques that seek to increase our understanding are needed for a number of reasons.

As noted above, Porter (1990) has called for improved forensics research in all areas. While Porter was referring specifically to variable-analytic research, applying her arguments to other forms of research seems appropriate given the general motivation of her argument. Porter argues that problems in forensics research stem from a lack of recognition of the value of research for legitimizing and improving it as pedagogy. As a result, neither enough research in general, nor enough research of sufficient complexity is being done in forensics. Better research, Porter argues, will be the key to improved support from administrations, elevation of the discipline of forensics, strengthening of the theoretical connections between forensics and the communication field, and to better education for our students. Though Porter's argument is now almost a decade old, and specific to one kind of research, evidence for a continued dearth of forensics research is clear and the need for greater variety in research approaches is clearly still in order. An examination of Hunt's extensive (1996, 1995) bibliography of forensics literature reveals the scattered and disparate nature of forensics research, both conceptually as well as in terms of publishing outlets. Porter (1990) as well as Logue and Shea (1990) call for an establishment of solid basic research as an integral step in strengthening the forensics literature that will help remedy the problems cited by Porter. This basic research should include strong qualitative approaches such as ethnography.

Writing that uses an ethnographic approach is conspicuously absent from the forensics research. This is surprising given that forensics professionals virtually live "in the field" (to use an ethnographic term) for most of the regular season for some and for most of the year for others. Indeed that the relative lack of time off for forensics professionals is a pressing concern is evidenced by its recurrence as topic for discussion on various email listserves such as IE-L, PARLI-L, and edebate. This is also surprising since ethnographic research is an established part of the communication field, a traditional home for many forensics programs. Ethnography of communication, as a sub-discipline, has an established core literature (Philipsen, 1994; Philipsen, 1975, Salzman, 1993; Duranti, 1988; Bauman & Sherzer, 1975; Hymes, 1974; Hymes, 1962, for

example). Given that ethnography is an established part of the field that houses most forensics programs and employs most forensics professionals, such an approach is appropriate.

More importantly, ethnography as an approach holds particular promise for study of the phenomenon of forensics. This essay will argue that forensics tournaments have a clear and observable culture and that certain practices may be observed as part of that culture. Working from a rules approach, ethnography allows the researcher to identify, describe, and theorize a wide range of cultural practices (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). That forensics posses structural elements that shape interaction seems intuitive. The activity is bounded by the tournament schedule, the rules of competition, and the hierarchical structure of directors of forensics, coaches, and competitors. Given these readily observable structures, the existence of other, deeper structures, seems likely. Since these structures are designed to influence public behavior, ethnographic research, as a behavior-oriented approach is more appropriate than survey or experimental research.

The Disparate Nature of the Forensics Literature

This general argument for stronger research in forensics should also address difficulty researchers may have in accessing the work of other scholars in the field. In general, much of the research and writing on forensics can be difficult to locate. In part, this is a function of the nature of the publications that tend to feature forensics pieces. In general, major journals in communication do not tend to feature research in forensics. This presents problems both in terms of ease with which one may find the literature and also the credibility accorded the research by other communication scholars. For both reasons, forensics researchers should attempt to publish in both major communication journals as well as forensics-specific journals. This should not in any way be read as an argument against forensics-specific journals. Publication in major communication journals helps the perceived credibility of forensics research in general and also helps the forensics –specific journals. We should branch out from our established core of publications into major journals such as Communication Education, for example.

Time, Research, and the Forensics Scholar

Finally, no treatment of this subject would be sufficient without a short discussion of what might be argued as a basic cause of the problems described above. Directors and coaches of forensics, who primarily produce the research on forensics, do so as part of an already very full time schedule. The same time-shortage that presents problems for many of our professionals in other research areas also hurts us in studying our own activity. The duties of the forensics professional often conflict with those of forensics researcher. The problem may be put in this way: We call for forensics research equal in rigor and quality to that of other areas of research conducted by those who are able to focus solely on research and teaching, without the added challenge of travel, hosting, and coaching. A remedy for this problem is probably the same one that would solve many of our associated problems of time to research on other areas and adequate credit for travel, hosting, and coaching at tenure review. Thus this basic problem in our body of research is bound to a basic problem facing the forensics scholar in general. As such, we must add this to our list of reasons for demanding better accounting for coaching and directing as academic labor. Better working conditions for coaches and directors can help us conduct better research on the activity and can therefore contribute to stronger forensics pedagogy.

In addition, it is important to remember that such extensive involvement can lead to naturally available research outlets. We are lucky because we by necessity spend so much of our time "in the field." Where other researchers write grants or give up academics to get precious times in the field, we get to do it as part of our job. Accordingly, forensics researchers should take greater advantage of this time, conceptualizing and carrying out research that capitalizes on the availability of data, both qualitative and quantitative. Ethnographers should observe and surveyors should survey at tournaments. What is clearly a barrier to our research can also be turned into an advantage.

Conclusion: Establishing Stronger Basic Research

This paper has aimed at describing some of the challenges faced by forensics research, fostering renewed discussion of these challenges, and arguing for the need for new and stronger

basic research. This third goal has been the main thrust of the argument here. Better basic research will eventually yield new and promising directions for subsequent research to follow. Better survey research may allow us to better serve a potentially changing group of students. The makeup of students in higher education is changing in general; perhaps our students are changing as well. In addition, theoretical statements yielded through ethnographic research may be productively researched through further observational work or perhaps through other social scientific means. Whatever course is chosen by the individual researcher, it seems clear that many critics of forensics research have argued that the foundations of our research need to be stronger. Perhaps better descriptive research can be the first step in that direction.

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